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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to engender a healthy respect for Gestalt theory and techniques and the use of the techniques in the client's best interest and in the interest of positive professional and self-development in the practitioner. An overview of Gestalt techniques is provided, concentrating on the two category divisions of experiments and exercises. This paper focuses on clinical rather than non-clinical settings, in which there is a responsibility to engage in ethically sound strategies with clients. The discussion continues with an overview of the importance of ethical guidelines for licensed practitioners and the relative merits of credentialling, training, and expertise when preparing to engage in such techniques as those associated with Gestalt theory. Examples of experiments are provided which help illustrate the dilemma of the ethical issues involved in the implementing of Gestalt techniques. The paper concludes with a discussion of concerns expressed by experts, including inappropriate use of Gestalt techniques and inappropriate selection of clients, misuse and abuse of techniques, and the professional's personal sense of ethical behavior. (Contains seven references.) (GCP)

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Running Head: Ethical Use of Gestalt Techniques

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Introduction

The basic goal of Gestalt therapy is the development of awareness in the client (Corey, 1995). In order to facilitate awareness in clients, Fritz Perls, who greatly popularized and developed Gestalt therapy, introduced the use of theory and techniques that had not been utilized in the traditional psychotherapy of the time, such as that psychoanalytic psychotherapy demonstrated by Sigmund Freud. Gestalt therapy theory and techniques differ considerably from those proposed and utilized by Freud in many ways, but that discussion is beyond the interest and scope of this paper. The purpose of this paper is to explore various facets of Gestalt techniques and the ethical use of these techniques.

Techniques: Experiments vs. Exercises

Gestalt techniques are divided into two categories, exercises and experiments (Zinker, 1977). Exercises are those activities which are deliberately planned for a therapy group or a group of people in any number of settings. Experiments, on the other hand, develop during a therapy session as a combination of the client's experience at the moment, the therapist's intuition, the therapist's personality, and the therapist's perception of the readiness of the client to engage in such an experiment (Zinker, 1977). Exercises, meant to be the more benign of the two, may be utilized in nonclinical contexts, including schools, churches, industry, and other settings in which there is a desire to ease tension

among participants or otherwise facilitate learning in a training atmosphere. For example, it is is not unusual to find the first meeting of some college classes beginning with an interactional exercise taking place as a kind of ice-breaker to help the students begin to feel more comfortable in that particular learning atmosphere, to help students begin to feel more comfortable with one another, and to help the instructor get to know the students and vice versa, in order to facilitate the learning process. Such an exercise may very well reflect Gestalt origin. Experiments, on the other hand, are considerably more complex. There are questions raised, and rightfully so, about how far a person inadequately trained in Gestalt theory and techniques can ethically go, if at all, with an experiment in terms of the intensity of feelings it might engender, how a determination is made between what is appropriate and what is not appropriate in developing such an experiment, and how a well-meaning, yet inadequately trained therapist plans to handle the situation if an experiment or an exercise gets out of hand in terms of the therapist's ability to manage the situation. These are areas of concern that will be addressed as this paper progresses.

Two quite different situations have been introduced here. The first has to do with the utilization of Gestalt techniques in both clinical and nonclinical settings. Examples were given above as to what these settings might be. To the untrained person who becomes acquainted with such techniques, knowing or not knowing about their Gestalt origin, the

techniques are quite attractive as potential contributors to the power of one's presentation before a group. At that point the techniques are up for grabs without a manual warning of potential negative outcomes. The second situation discussed here more clearly warrants attention to those kinds of things which Zinker referred to, including the importance of laying groundwork, negotiating, contracting, debriefing, and inviting participation as opposed to expecting participation in order to create a clinically and ethically sound endeavor with the individuals involved. In the context of exploring *ethical* use of Gestalt techniques perhaps a discussion of the nonclinical use of these techniques is irrelevant. After all, the individual utilizing the techniques is the one who must answer to his or her own code of ethical behavior within his or her own profession. Therefore, the focus which follows will be on those situations in which there is responsibility to engage in ethically sound strategies with clients.

Ethical Guidelines

As for those of us in clinical settings, especially when there is a licensed practitioner involved, this discussion is critical. According to the Codes of Ethics and Standards of Practice of the American Counseling Association (1995, cited in Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 1998), counselors are to practice only within their areas of competence, based on training, supervised experience, education, appropriate professional experience, and as defined by state and national credentialling agencies. In addition, while counselors are

learning about and practicing new areas they must take steps to protect clients from harm that might result from the use of strategies related to the new areas, and they must take steps to ensure the competence of their work while they are in the learning process. Certainly, the use of Gestalt theory and techniques could be included in a category of practice warranting specialized training and supervision. In other words, a counselor's use of such techniques could be called into question in certain cases, particuarly if the expected training and supervision had not taken place. In another ethical area counselors assume an obligation to be responsive to issues of diversity in client populations, as well as other populations. According to Corey (1996), some techniques of Gestalt origin may be inherently insensitive to the behavioral parameters of some cultures, particularly those in which it would be considered wrongful to express emotions or emotions about some issues, especially in the presence of individuals other than family.

Likewise, according to the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct of the American Psychological Association (1995, cited in Corey, et. al, 1998), psychologists have very similar obligations. Social workers are governed by paralleling guidelines, as set forth in the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (1996, cited in Corey, et. al., 1998).

Cedentialling vs. Training and Experitse

Even though such professionals are licensed, meaning possessing credentials stating

that there has been the prescribed education, supervision, and demonstration of the minimum level of competence to engage in the profession, these professionals are not necessarily prepared to engage in such techniques as those associated with Gestalt theory. For example, graduate level programs in the above professions do not routinely provide specialized training in such areas as Gestalt theory and techniques. This is not a fault of these educational programs. It is simply a matter that the programs cannot provide everything that a future practitioner may need to know. Areas of particular interest and practice are left up to the research and evaluation skills of the individual for further investigation. In investigating the background of Gestalt theory and techniques one can find that there is a considerable amount of information about the uses of these techniques. While it is not necessary to master all of this information in order to develop an adequate level of expertise in utilizing Gestalt theory and techniques, the practitioner does need to be mindful of the possible consequences of implementing these, as well as to be prepared to demonstrate that expertise in carrying through. New counselors complete their programs, willing to deal with shortcomings and perceived deficits of knowledge, although being uncertain as to what these deficits in knowledge are. This is simply to point out that there are always things to learn and utilize in the interest of professional development and in the interest of the clients served.

At this point it is only fair to make a reference to the argument that the practice of so-called Gestalt techniques outside of engaging in Gestalt therapy is not actually engaging in Gestalt anything (Lazarus, 1996). The apparent lack of agreement among experts on that issue makes it even more unclear as to whether we are talking about Gestalt techniques and their ethical use or not. Perhaps this is just about ethical implementation of *any* technique. Zinker's (1977) very specific steps to be utilized in setting up an experiment are something counselors may not consciously consider or know about, and these steps would be beneficial to the utilization of any strategy with a client in the therapy situation. It could be argued here that counselors do those things on a regular basis, and a separate discussion is not necessary. Again, we are talking here about techniques with some potentially powerful results, warranting, perhaps, a closer look at their management. Fortunately many counselors are just able to naturally manage situations in therapy that could result in more serious situations if they are handled otherwise. While that talent and ability are extremely helpful for a counselor or therapist, it is still recognized rather universally that such specific strategies as clinical utilization of Gestalt theory and techniques need to be carefully supervised for a period of time following specific training (Zinker, 1977). These issues may become clearer in the following discussion of particular Gestalt experiments that are used in the clinical setting, whether in the context of Gestalt therapy per se or not.

Examples of Experiments

It now seems appropriate to explore some examples of experiments to help illustrate the dilemma of the ethical issues involved in the implementing of Gestalt techniques. The reference is to those experiments which come directly out of the here-and-now in a therapy session and are not pre-planned as the exercises are. Experiments are the topic here because it seems like experiments leave the most room for questions of ethics in the sense of professional responsibility and accountability for their use. There is an assumption that the more benign exercises utilized by trained professionals will be carefully chosen and considered. Therefore, the ethics of engaging in them will not be explored in such detail in this paper.

Caricature

As an example, the caricature experiment involves the engagement of group members in exaggerated behavior depicting another group member or group members. The idea behind this is to provide group members with material from which to grow as individuals. Obviously, a great deal of damage could be done if this is not handled therapeutically or at the wrong time in the developmental process of the group and the individuals involved. Zinker (1977), therefore, stresses the importance of going through a particular process in setting up the experiment, including the sequence of laying groundwork, negotiating consensus between or among the client(s) and therapist, grading the proposed experiment

in terms of difficulty for the client, helping the client surface his or her awareness, finding the client's energy, developing self-support for both therapist and client, making the appropriate choice of experiment, actually acting out the experiment, and debriefing the client for completion and insights. It seems likely that, if these steps are followed, there will be a better chance that the experiment will not cause harm, and could, potentially, provide an atmosphere for growth. Another obvious thing is that, since such an experiment is happening spontaneously, the therapist must be quickly planning this all through in his or her head with some degree of confidence that things will go reasonably well upon implementation. It would follow that, for this process to take place quickly and accurately within the therapist, experience and adequate supervision would be the predecessors. The contract, negotiation, and laying groundwork, as well as the other preparatory issues addressed by Zinker (1977) are critical to such an experiment in order to protect clients from harm. If a client is harmed in some way, then the counselor or therapist's reputation and ethical behavior may be called into question.

An important note to add at this point in time is that clients entering into a Gestalt group would, by definition of a truly Gestalt group (Zinker, 1977), be consenting to their voluntary participation in experiments designed to assist them in building their autonomy and awareness. Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951) offer the guideline that potential group members be screened and informed before the actual onset of the group that there

will be techniques utilized for the facilitation of growth in the participants. However, individuals entering into a group not specified as a Gestalt therapy group may not be so prepared. In that case, the discretion and judgment are left up to the group leader or leaders.

Empty Chair

Another example worthy of exploration is the empty chair technique. This technique, when used as an experiment, has the potential for stirring up very powerful emotions. In this experiment a client is acting out a part, speaking to him- or herself or another individual, that person represented by an empty chair. This activity arises out of a situation in which the client is asked to address the empty chair by the practitioner upon the practitioner's recognition that there is some immediate work being done by the client regarding a particular situation. The possible modifications of this experiment are limitless. In the hands of even a trained person who is not *adequately* experienced and trained, this situation could be potentially damaging to the client. The list of techniques goes on and on, and there is a great continuum from those techniques and factors that are less likely to stir up emotions to those that are more likely to do so.

Reichian Body Techniques

Corey (1995) addresses, in the context of Gestalt therapy, Reichian body techniques and their use. Corey very strongly cautions against utilizing such techniques without

extensive training and supervision. These particular techniques are are afforded only cursory presentation in familiar Gestalt texts, and it could be implied that it is the seriousness of these techniques which precludes their presentation for more general exploration in the study of Gestalt theory and techniques. However, it is still left up to the practitioner to decide how much training is enough without consultation from a professional who is truly experienced and educated in these techniques.

Concerns Expressed by the Experts

Techniques and the Therapist Who Employs Them

Perls (1969, cited in Corey, 1995) warned that techniques are not to be considered as separate from the personality of the therapist who employs them. He cautions that a therapist can become hidden and phony by overuse of techniques. Such a situation, he cautions, could actually prevent growth in the client. Corey (1995) believes that techniques can become mere gimmicks which can ultimately lead to less authentic living on the part of the clients they were meant to help. Another point made by Corey (1995) is that it is extremely important to *invite* individuals to participate in techniques. He also points out that excessive use of techniques can lead to dependence on the group leader to be the one who fills up the group time with techniques, neglecting the spirit of building autonomy which needs to be a part of the Gestalt therapeutic atmosphere. Zinker (1977), a very influential person in the current training and issues pertaining to Gestalt therapy,

says that Gestalt therapists must have characteristics such as sensitivity, timing, inventiveness, empathy, and respect for the client, in order to expect to be able to engage in techniques for which he or she is trained. Shepherd (1970, cited in Corey, 1995) contends that truly effective applications of Gestalt techniques occur following the therapist's personal experience with Gestalt therapy.

Inappropriate Use of Techniques and Inappropriate Selection of Clients

Corey (1995) believes that utilization of techniques can give the therapist power over the client that can result in dangerous consequences in terms of therapy. He continues by saying that inept therapists simply may not be able to assist a client in working through what he or she has experienced during powerful techniques, leaving the client without the appropriate closure. Another extremely important consideration in terms of the ethics of utilizing experiments, or Gestalt therapy in general, involves the appropriateness of clients for these strategies. For example, Gestalt methods and techniques in their pure form are not appropriate for and could be detrimental to the treatment of particular categories of clients. These categories would include those with psychosis and those who tend to act out (Shepherd, 1970, cited in Corey, 1995). These clients are in need of more cognitively and/or behaviorally based therapeutic strategies, or at least techniques utilized by someone very specifically trained to engage in Gestalt techniques with that type of client.

Misuse and Abuse of Techniques

So the remaining questions are about who is qualified to do what techniques, in what settings, and who will make these determinations. At this point in time we can hope that those professionals who do use the techniques in the clinical setting or elsewhere do so with a sense of accountability and with a healthy respect for possible human consequences of misuse of techniques, as well as with the spirit of benefiting the client before him or herself. As mentioned previously, there is excitement in Gestalt techniques, and this excitement can truly contribute a great deal to a presentation or an interaction with a group. However, it is clearly embraced by the Gestalt movement that Gestalt techniques were not developed for that purpose. According to Harman (1996) Gestalt techniques are developed to help the client at an impasse, facilitate the client's awareness, and help the client make clearer contact. Harman further says that any use of the techniques other than the intended use is abuse of such techniques.

Personal Sense of Ethical Behavior

Perhaps the following is not an argument which has a direct bearing on ethical use of Gestalt techniques, but it does deserve mention, and it could have some bearing on a therapist's sense of personal ethics. There is an almost sacred and reverent regard given to the Gestalt movement by many people. This regard is reflected in a number of resources (Zinker, 1977, Feder & Ronall, 1980, and Harman, 1996). One who engages

in extended study of the Gestalt movement may develop a sense of this regard. The techniques were developed to be used correctly and appropriately, and this needs to be upheld. Undoubtedly, many counselors will utilize Gestalt techniques. However, it is important to acknowledge, at least within the self, the important nature of the technique used and the respect warranted in implementing it in a more proper and prescribed manner in the clinical setting or otherwise.

Conclusion

Gestalt therapy and techniques are fascinating to study and exciting and powerful to engage in, either as a therapist or a client. This paper is not meant to discourage their use as a therapeutic tool in the therapy setting. What this paper is meant to do is engender a healthy respect for Gestalt theory and techniques and the use of the techniques in the client's best interest and in the interest of positive professional and self-development in the practitioner. Ethical issues have been proposed for consideration in the use of Gestalt techniques, and that careful consideration by the practitioner is what is sought at this point.

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